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Resourcing the constituency campaign in the UK

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For Peer Review

Resourcing the constituency campaign in the UK

Abstract

First-past-the-post electoral rules create strong incentives for parties to focus their campaigns on key marginal seats and much research has been devoted to the vote-winning potential of such activity. Less attention has been given to local party organisations' ability to mount these campaigns, however. We therefore examine recent evidence of British political parties' local campaigning capacities. Overall, Britain's grassroots party organisations are struggling. While some local parties are resource-rich, many are not: only half of all Conservative and fewer than one in six Labour and Liberal Democrat constituency parties had an annual turnover in 2010 exceeding £25,000. Many local parties are seriously under-resourced: funds are limited, donations meagre, and members few. For most local parties, campaign resources depend primarily on their own local fund-raising initiatives – but their yields tend to be low. Even in key marginal constituencies, many local parties increasingly struggle to resource their campaign activities. What is more, there are substantial variations between the various political parties in the relative health of their constituency operations, and in the national parties' abilities to subsidise local activities in strategically important seats. The implications for local voter mobilization efforts in the UK are not good.

Resourcing the constituency campaign in the UK

Whatever else they do, political parties exist to mobilise support. Their campaigns contact voters, enthuse supporters, and strive to win over the wavering, to increase their vote tally on election day. Much of that effort takes place at the grassroots, in individual constituencies. As a now substantial research literature demonstrates, local campaigning pays electoral dividends: where parties campaign hard, their support grows, especially where they are the challenger, not the incumbent, in the seat (e.g. Johnston, 1987; Pattie *et al.*, 1995; Denver and Hands, 1997; Fieldhouse and Cutts 2007). Recognising this, the major parties increasingly integrate local campaigning into national campaign strategies (Fisher and Denver, 2008, 2009). Constituency campaigning focusses heavily on the more marginal seats where the result is in the balance, and mount only limited and tokenistic campaigns in safer seats where the outcome is not seriously in question. In the UK's plurality-rule electoral system, such targeting is not only efficient: it is arguably essential as elections are won and lost on the results in a relatively few closely contested constituencies.

Grassroots campaigns remain, therefore, a central element in British elections and are important to parties' election strategies and prospects. Inevitably, they require resourcing: willing volunteers need to be recruited, supported, and supplied with material; leaflets and posters printed; mailing lists and databases maintained; election literature delivered; supporters identified and encouraged to vote; and so on. But here the increasing strategic and (to an extent) technological sophistication of 21st century campaigning clashes with another well-established trend in modern political life, the decline of political parties. In the early 1950s, the Conservatives claimed almost 3 million and Labour over a million members (all figures from McGuinness, 2012). In both cases, these numbers almost certainly very substantially overstate the active membership, as many members joined to enjoy their local Conservative Association's social facilities, and many Labour members were automatically enrolled through their trade union membership. Even so, this does imply relatively healthy grassroots organisations. The Liberals, meanwhile, claimed over a quarter of a million members in the mid-1960s. By 2011, all three parties had suffered a substantial membership erosion, the Conservatives to between 130,000 and 170,000, Labour 193,000 and the Liberal Democrats just 49,000. The decline is all the more dramatic as the UK electorate had grown substantially: in the early 1970s, around 5% of the electorate were Conservative or Labour members: by 2010, only 0.8% were (and only 0.1% were Liberal Democrats).

This constitutes a major difficulty for the parties. Their local campaigns depend heavily on the efforts and funds of local members and volunteers. So declining party membership raises serious questions for the parties' capacities to mount extensive and effective constituency campaigns. This paper uses recently available evidence to examine the health of British political parties' grassroots organisations. How well placed are the parties to resource their local campaign efforts? Where do they look in their fund-raising efforts and how much income do they generate? Most important of all, are they equally well resourced (as they would ideally be if it was deemed important that all electors should have the same opportunity to engage with the campaign, whatever their locality), or do some parties face greater challenges than others?

Changing parties, changing grassroots?

To understand the health of British grassroots party democracy, it is useful to reflect briefly on the changing nature of parties and the environments within which they operate. Parties

remain key actors in modern democracies (Seyd, 1998). They help formulate and formalise the choices before voters, they aggregate demands, they mobilise support. Yet the environment in which they operate has changed substantially since the mid-twentieth century. Then, Britain's major political parties were mass membership organisations, firmly grounded in a strongly class-aligned electorate. However, declining party membership and class dealignment since have undermined the mass party model and parties have shifted towards more catch-all strategies, making cross-class appeals to wider groups of the electorate (Kircheimer, 1966; Evans *et al.*, 1999). Central party organisations and leadership have become much more important relative to the membership, a shift captured in Katz and Mair's (1995, 2009) notion of the 'cartel party'. Both moves have been in part a response to, but also in part a cause of, declining grassroots involvement.

The nature of parties' vote-seeking activities has also changed, from pre-modern through modern, to post-modern campaigning (Norris, 2000). In the pre-modern campaign era (the period before the advent of widespread television election coverage in the late 1950s), the bulk of electioneering was carried out through constituency campaigning. With little central co-ordination, each local party largely ran its own show, organised its own mass meetings, published and distributed its own literature, and used its relatively large local membership to canvass voters face-to-face on the doorstep. But television changed all that, ushering in Norris's 'modern campaign' era. Audiences for local election meetings declined steeply: voters preferred to stay at home and watch the campaign on TV (Benney *et al.*, 1956, 155ff.) which freed party leaders from reliance on their local memberships and enabled them to appeal directly to voters in their own homes, by using nationally-produced and -delivered party election broadcasts. For some, this reduced constituency campaigns to empty rituals, shorn of any real capacity to affect the outcome (Kavanagh, 1970). That judgement was always somewhat overstated, however, as became clear when electioneering entered a 'post-modern' era in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In this new phase, party leaderships tried to exert ever greater control over the campaign, professionalising their operations markedly, taking much tighter control over the party's image and message, employing news management and market research strategies, and ensuring all those engaged in the campaign stayed resolutely 'on message'.

Ironically, the increasing centralisation and professionalization of parties' campaign activities in the post-modern era also revitalised interest in constituency campaigning. National campaign teams saw the strategic value of carefully targeted campaigning in marginal seats, as these were the battlegrounds in which the election could be won or lost. The constituency campaign was increasingly integrated into the professionalised national campaign strategy (Fisher and Denver, 2008, 2009).

The constituency campaign has returned to the main stage of British electioneering, therefore, as parties respond to changing times. But are the constituency parties in a good position to play the roles required of them?

Measuring parties' local resource bases

Providing a full picture of the major parties' local resource bases is not easy. No single central data base exists and the available information is piecemeal and incomplete. Surveys of party activists provide useful insights, suggesting that parties' local organisations in many seats are generally small and highly dependent on an even smaller core of active members (Seyd and Whiteley, 1992; Whiteley, Seyd and Richardson, 1994; Whiteley and Seyd, 2002;

Whiteley, Seyd and Billingham, 2006). However, such surveys are relatively rare and are patchy in their geographical coverage: few constituency parties are sufficiently well represented in them to provide truly robust local estimates. The data, while valuable, therefore contain major temporal and geographical gaps. An alternative survey-based approach has been to canvass parties' local election agents immediately after General Elections, asking them for information on their campaign activities (Denver and Hands, 1997, 1998; Denver *et al.*, 2003; Fisher and Denver, 2009; Fieldhouse and Cutts 2009). Agent surveys have been conducted at every UK General Election since 1992, giving rather better temporal coverage than party member surveys. However, like member surveys, they suffer from a somewhat patchy geographical coverage: many constituency agents do not participate. Furthermore, as the surveys focus primarily on election campaigning, they give only partial insights into how well-founded local parties are between elections. But campaigning is no longer (if, indeed, it ever was) restricted just to the immediate pre-election periods. Rather, it is a long-term activity in many seats (particularly the pivotal marginals), beginning some years before any likely General Election to gradually build up a local support base.

The following discussion draws on three official data sources (all maintained by the UK Electoral Commission), part of the general regulatory regime (an extensive analysis can be found in Johnston and Pattie, 2014). The longest-established of these sources, returns of each General Election candidate's election expenses, can be traced back to the *Corrupt and Illegal Practices Act 1883*, which set limits to their individual campaign expenditure and required them to make publicly-available returns detailing that expenditure and giving information on how the money had been raised. While the former data on expenditure have been widely studied the latter, on income sources, have not – largely because the information provided is generally highly opaque and unhelpful (Johnston *et al.*, 1999). Other than periodic increases in the ceiling for allowed candidate expenditure (which have not kept track with inflation, however: the real-terms amounts modern candidates are permitted to spend are considerably below the equivalents faced by their nineteenth-century predecessors), the only major change affecting this data source came in the *Political Parties and Elections Act 2009*, which for the first time set candidate spending limits and reporting requirements not only for the four or so weeks of the official (or short) campaign, but also for the preceding three months (the 'long' campaign). These data have the great virtue of being available for all candidates. However, they cover only the long and short campaign periods, and only funding aimed at the election of individual candidates. They cannot alone provide a picture of the health of a party's grassroots organisation, therefore. For instance, a local party might be in rude health in terms of both members and funds. But if the constituency served by the local party is either one of its electoral strongholds or a seat in which the party has no realistic chance of success, the campaign spending data are liable to show relatively low levels of activity, despite the local party's underlying riches. What is more, as candidate expenditure is subject to a tight – and relatively low – cap, it is possible (though not easy) for poorly resourced local parties to scrape together enough money to ensure their candidate can reach that limit.

Fortunately, much more recent legislative changes have created the second and third sources deployed here, which go some considerable way to addressing these shortcomings of the candidate expenditure data. The *Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000* (PPERA) was the first to regulate British parties' finances – as against their candidates'. It required them to provide information on all individual political donations of over £5,000, and those over £1,000 to 'local accounting units' (most of which are constituency parties) and to return audited annual accounts for each accounting unit if their 'gross income or total expenditure during a financial year exceed(ed) £25,000' (Schedule 5, 6(1)). Our second and

third sources use the information the parties return to comply with this legislation. The second source is the database of all donations above the £5,000 threshold and the third comprises the accounts which constituency parties return to the Electoral Commission. While the first two sources are relatively straightforward to use (as they are available as standardised spreadsheets), the third requires considerable work. The accounts are neither standardised nor entered into a spreadsheet,¹ but are scanned directly from the paper copies supplied by the parties to the Commission. These are highly variable in content, detail and presentation, not only between but also within parties, making compilation of a database difficult. However, they do provide local detail and in many cases also give insight into grassroots membership levels.

Between them, therefore, the three data sources give a broad insight into just how vibrant – or not – the parties' grassroots are. Where local parties do exceed the £25,000 annual turnover threshold for returning accounts, we can see their resourcing in some detail. Where their turnover does not reach this threshold, we have less insight – but the very fact that they are operating below this financial threshold is telling in itself.

Campaigning on a shoe-string

We begin by looking at the parties' reported campaign expenditure in the 2010 UK General Election (Table 1). Our focus is on the amount each spent on its constituency campaigns but to place this in context we also look at the parties' declared expenditure on their national campaigning (the bulk of which went on printing general election literature, conducting market research, producing election broadcasts, paying for events and rallies, and administrative costs). Under PPERA, each party's national expenditure in 2010 was limited to £30,000 for each seat contested so if a party contested all 650 UK seats it could spend up to £19.5 million on its national campaign. The Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat parties contested neither the Northern Ireland constituencies nor the Speaker's seat, so the real ceiling for their national campaign budget in 2010 was £18.9 million. None reached this figure, however. The Conservatives came closest, spending £16.7 million nationally. This was more than the Labour and Liberal Democrat national expenditures combined (the former spent just under half as much as the Conservatives, and the latter just over 25% as much). These substantial differences in campaign outlays point to major differences in their available resources. Whereas in 2001 and 2005 Labour at least had matched (and even slightly exceeded) Conservative national expenditure, by 2010 the party could no longer compete, in large part because, as an incumbent government which looked very likely to lose the election, it found it harder than in the two preceding elections (both of which it was very likely to win) to persuade major potential backers to fund the party.

The expenditure for the 2010 constituency campaigns (we combine here expenditure on both the long and short campaigns), while large, was smaller than for the national. The Conservatives once again were the largest spenders spending almost £10 million in total on their constituency campaigns. Labour, meanwhile, spent £6.5 million, while the Liberal Democrats spent £5 million. Of the three, only the latter spent more on its constituency than national campaign: the Conservatives spent just under 60% as much on their constituency battles as on the national contest while Labour's local spending was about 80% of its national.

¹ This has recently changed: the Electoral Commission now produces a spreadsheet showing each accounting unit's annual income and expenditure, but neither is broken down into its main components (information on which has to be obtained from the original documents).

The headline figures therefore show the substantial sums the parties needed to raise in order to mount a full campaign. The overall budget for all three parties' national and constituency campaigns in 2010 came to £50.8 million. And the totals spent on constituency battles look large compared to national spending, which might suggest to a casual observer that resourcing for local campaigns was robust. However, this does not mean that the grassroots campaign was well-resourced. Indeed, the data highlight just how far short of meeting even the relatively low limits for candidate spending the major parties fall. A party which spent up to the limit in all 632 constituencies in Great Britain would have spent £25,334,828 in 2010. None of the three parties came remotely close: the Conservatives spent just 39% of that amount, Labour 26% and the Liberal Democrats only 25%. In many constituencies it was an operation run on a relative shoe-string. In the average constituency, a candidate who chose to spend up to the legally-permitted limits on both the long and the short campaigns would have faced a bill of £40,700. If we take this as an (admittedly arbitrary) indicator of an adequately resourced campaign, in which the local candidate made every effort he or she was able to reach and persuade voters throughout the seat, then almost every local party organisation in the country fell short, many by a very wide margin indeed. Even the Conservatives fell well short: their average candidate spent just £15,618 on the constituency battle, around 40% of the legal maximum.

What is more, there were substantial variations across constituencies in how much each party spent on its local campaign. Figure 1 shows boxplots for each party's total (short and long campaign combined) spending in each constituency at the 2010 election, expressed as a percentage of the legal maximum permitted in each seat² (the figure ranks each party's constituency campaigns from the lowest to the highest spending: the boxes represent the middle 50% of constituencies, with the median spending level indicated by the horizontal line within them, and the 'whiskers' below and above the box show the lowest 25% and the highest 25% of constituencies). All three parties spent up to the maximum possible in some seats, and virtually nothing in others. But in general local spending was heavily skewed: most local parties spent relatively little, well short of the allowed maxima. Even the relatively well-resourced Conservatives spent less than 60% of the permitted amount in around three-quarters of their constituency battles: the median was just 33%. Most Labour and Liberal Democrat constituency campaigns spent less, with medians of 19% and 8% respectively. Far from suggesting robust local campaigns, therefore, the 2010 constituency spending data show that in all bar a relatively few seats, the main political parties were running relatively weak campaigns at best.

In 2010, as in previous elections, the allocation of resources was broadly rational, with the parties focussing on the most marginal seats, where the election result was most in the balance (figure 2). The 2005 election results can be used to calculate how marginal each party's position was in each seat.³ Where a party won a seat in 2005, we calculate marginality as the percentage point difference between its share of the vote then and the second-placed party's: where it lost, marginality is the difference between its share and the winning party's. The more positive the marginality score, therefore, the safer the seat for the party, while the

² These percentages are deployed because the maximum that can be spent in each constituency varies according to the size of its registered electorate and whether the seat is classified as borough (urban) or county (rural).
³ A major redistricting exercise changed the boundaries of the English and Welsh constituencies between the 2005 and 2010 elections (the Scottish constituencies had been redistricted before the 2005 contest). We therefore use notional estimates of the 2005 election results had that contest been fought in the 2010 constituencies (Rallings and Thrasher, 2007).

more negative the score, the further behind the party was: marginality scores close to zero indicate those seats where each party faced the most intense competition. To show the general trends, figure 2 also displays the Lowess regression line for each party, fitted to the nearest 40% of the points.

The overall pattern is quite logical. All three parties generally spent little or nothing in seats where they had little chance of winning. All also spent relatively little where they were defending large majorities and were unlikely to lose (though they all spent more in these seats than in their 'dead loss' constituencies): this was particularly pronounced for Labour and the Conservatives but less so for the Liberal Democrats, who had relatively few safe seats. And all three spent most in the more marginal seats, though here too there were important though predictable differences between the parties. Labour, the incumbent government in 2010, had to fight against the backdrop of a deep recession for which it was widely held partly responsible, having been in continuous power for the preceding 13 years. Realistically, therefore, the prospect of its winning more seats in 2010 was remote and its main goal was to protect those seats it already held. Hence its constituency campaign spending peaked just to the right of the vertical line indicating the most marginal possible seat: these were the marginal constituencies Labour held going into the election but feared it might lose. Indeed, if anything, the party's constituency campaign spending peak was a bit further right yet on the marginality axis, suggesting that it had resigned itself to losing many of its most marginal seats and was focussing on the next layer down to ensure any possible rout was contained. The Conservatives, meanwhile, as the main opposition, hoped to win sufficient seats primarily from Labour to form a majority government. Their campaign spending therefore peaked in those seats they had lost by the narrowest margins in 2005. The Liberal Democrats' peak spend was less sharply focussed in their most marginal seats than their two larger rivals' but their campaign resources, too, were expended in marginal seats first and foremost.

As noted above, the observation that many constituency parties, especially in the less competitive constituencies, spent only a little on their 2010 campaigns, while suggestive, is not conclusive evidence that British local parties are poorly resourced. After all, the combination of the logic of campaigning in a plurality election system, combined with the tight legal limits on candidates' spending, would restrict campaign outlays even if local parties were all awash with money. However, a closer look at the spending data reveals more grounds to suspect that resources are very limited in most constituencies where most parties spent only a little on the long campaign over the four months before the election was called, and rather more on the four weeks of the short campaign (figure 3). Over both time periods, on average Conservative local parties outspent their Labour and Liberal Democrat rivals. But even among the Conservatives, most local parties' expenditures over the long campaign fell substantially short of the limits which implies that most did not have the funds required to run both their long and short campaigns at full tilt. Rather, they acted as though they were husbanding scarce resources till the last minute.⁴

Not only that, but insofar as the constituency spending data relate to the health of parties' grassroots operations, trends point to a worsening picture. Because the 'long campaign' was not regulated prior to the 2010 election, we can only analyse spending during the official 'short campaign'. In 1997, the Conservatives spent £3.9 million, Labour £3.8 million, and the Liberal Democrats £1.9million. Thirteen years later, they spent £4.9million, £3.6million and

⁴ Suggestions to replace the long and short campaigns at future elections by a single four-month campaign period, with a maximum expenditure of c.£40,000, could allow some local rich parties to husband their resources until the last few weeks and then very substantially out-spend their opponents in marginal seats.

£2.7million respectively. Taking inflation into account, in constant 1997 prices, their 2010 short campaign spending totals were £3.1million, £2.3million and £1.7million. In real terms, all three spent less at the later election.

Funding the local party

Stronger insights into the resourcing of the grassroots come from the information on local fund-raising contained in the financial accounts which local party organisations with annual turnovers in excess of £25,000 returned to the Electoral Commission. A first indicator of financial health is the number of local parties which pass this threshold and make returns (figure 4). Few Labour or Liberal Democrat local parties do. Between 2007 and 2010, fewer than a hundred of each party’s constituency organisations (out of 632 seats in Britain as a whole) had sufficient annual income or expenditure to require making a return. The numbers increased as the 2010 election drew closer and local parties upped their levels of activity in preparation. Many more Conservative local associations passed the threshold for returning accounts: 328 did so in 2007, rising to 365 in 2009 (though falling very slightly again to 359 in 2010). Even so, the clear impression for all three parties is that in many constituencies they were functioning on quite limited resources.

What is more, whether a local party made a return to the Commission (and hence, by implication, could sustain activity at a level sufficient to necessitate doing so) was not random. By and large, the more marginal the seat at the previous, 2005, election, the more likely the local party was to make a return in 2010 (figure 5). The pattern was particularly pronounced for the Conservatives, but was also present (albeit at a much lower level) for both Labour and the Liberal Democrats. This clearly matches the tendency, identified above, for parties to focus their campaign spending in the most marginal seats.

However, given the clear importance of the marginals as election battlegrounds, the parties were in very different positions regarding their capacity to campaign there. The Conservatives were in the best shape going into the 2010 election. Of the 86 seats the party won by a margin of less than 10% in 2005, 75 made a return to the Commission in 2010, as did 112 of those in the 160 seats the Conservatives lost by a similar margin. Overall, 76% of Conservative local organisations in the party’s most marginal seats were sufficiently active in 2010 to necessitate making a return. The picture was not quite as healthy for the Liberal Democrats: in the seats they won or lost by margins of less than 10% in 2005, only 58% made a return to the Commission in 2010. But Labour was, by some margin, in the worst position in this regard: only 20% of its local parties in its most marginal seats made a return. This emphasises how hard it must have been for Labour especially to mount effective local campaigns even in those seats where it was vitally important for the party’s election prospects that it did so.

Nor is it likely that most of the local party organisations which failed to make returns were operating at turnover levels just below the threshold. Research conducted in 2003, the first year in which the new regulations were in place, gathered data not only for those local parties which did make returns but also for a sample of those which did not (Pinto-Duschinsky, 2008). In that (non-election) year, only the Conservatives were in the relatively comfortable position of having (just) over half their local associations spend more than the £25,000 reporting threshold. The median Labour and Liberal Democrat local parties spent much less than this, just £6,112 and £7,990 respectively. For Labour in particular, the picture was even bleaker than suggested by the median alone. Three-quarters of its constituency parties spent

less than £11,274 in 2003, and a quarter spent less than £3,059. In contrast, the upper and lower quartiles for the Liberal Democrats were £31,437 and £1,770, while for the Conservatives they were a much healthier £52,398 and £8,459. The picture, therefore is of some (and for the Liberal Democrats and especially Labour only a very few) well-resourced local parties, but many more where the local organisation was in a comparatively parlous financial state.

Nor are the difficulties limited to expenditure, as a more detailed examination of the returns for 2010 indicate (table 2: similar patterns hold in other years). As this was an election year, one might expect that grassroots party activity would be at a peak. Even so, even among those constituency parties which made a return, many were struggling. As in previous examples, the Conservatives were the best resourced. In over half of all constituencies, the local party's finances were large enough to warrant making a return to the Commission, and, among those doing so, the median Conservative local association reported an income of £50.9k, spent £55.6k, and had reserves of £45.4k. In contrast, only around 80 Labour and Liberal Democrat local party organisations had to make a return, and even among these (almost certainly the best-resourced for their parties), resourcing fell well short of the levels enjoyed by the Conservatives. The median 'returning' local Labour party reported a 2010 income of £36.6k, an expenditure of £38.5k and £22.0k in reserves. The median Liberal Democrat party, meanwhile, earned £40.7k and spent £41.3k, more than the Labour, and less than the Conservative medians (though the Liberal Democrats had the lowest median reserves, at £10.9k just half of the equivalent for Labour and a quarter of that for the Conservatives).

For all three parties, however, there were major variations, even among those making returns at all. In all cases, the mean levels of income, expenditure and reserves were substantially higher than the medians, indicating a strong positive skew in the distributions. A small group of local parties were much better resourced than most of those making returns (and, by extension, than most other local parties too). Just how much better resourced these few were is indicated by the upper quartiles and maxima. The best-resourced local Conservative party in 2010 spent almost quarter of a million pounds on its activities (not, it has to be said, all on its election campaign, which would have been capped well below this level), and raised a roughly equivalent amount, while enjoying both reserves and fixed assets of nearly £1.5million each (where local parties reported substantial fixed assets, these were usually in the form of property, often housing the local party headquarters, from which they could derive some rental income).⁵ But even the best-resourced local Labour and Liberal Democrat parties operated at only about half this level of funding (and the largest reported level of fixed assets among Liberal Democrat parties was just £200k, well below either the Conservative or Labour maxima). That said, such wealth was very much the exception. For all three parties, most of their local constituency branches were making the best of much more limited financial resources.

Nor are local parties' difficulties limited to their generally straightened financial circumstances. Some local parties' returns to the Electoral Commission also contained information on membership, providing insights into the number of local activists the parties

⁵ Local parties had many more calls on their spending in 2010 than just their general election campaigns. In many parts of the country, for instance, they also had to support the costs of campaigning in local government elections. Some raised money to donate to the central party (for an analysis of Conservative local donations to the national party in the 1990s, see Pattie and Johnston, 1996). Where local parties maintained offices, they had rents to pay. Where they had a permanent agent (or shared one with other seats), that person's wages needed to be met. And so on.

can call on – although not all members are active, and not all activists and campaign workers are members (many are volunteers who support and work for but have not joined the party: Fisher *et al.*, 2013). Even so, the reported membership figures do not suggest large numbers of party workers available to engage with the electorate during campaigns. Of those providing membership information, the median Conservative and Labour local parties each reported around 400 members, while the median Liberal Democrat party reported around 240. Given that those local parties which do make returns are by definition much better resourced than most, the implication is that many local parties – perhaps even most – have considerably fewer local members or workers on which to draw. When set against the average constituency electorate (around 70,300 voters in 2010), these figures show just how stretched local parties are likely to be during elections which is hardly likely to result in high-quality interactions between campaigners and most voters.

Overall, therefore, the returns to the Electoral Commission do not present a healthy picture of the state of the parties’ grassroots operations. On the contrary, many (most?) local parties are hanging by a narrow thread, unable to mount much more than relatively token campaigns. Targeting marginal seats for more campaign attention is a rational response to the logic of plurality elections. But it is also a necessary response to a generally weak grassroots presence. Put bluntly, most local parties in Britain could not run an all-out campaign (or anything remotely close) in their area even if they wanted to – and have to rely increasingly on the central party organisation canvassing potential supporters in target seats from remote call-centres and sending them direct mailings which might be followed up on the doorstep by local activists.

Who pays the local piper?

So how are local parties resourced? Are there untapped reservoirs of material, money and volunteers waiting to be mobilised by a sufficiently entrepreneurial party, or are the parties working at the limit of what is currently possible? To find out, the financial returns deposited with the Electoral Commission can be interrogated further.

Those returns do not provide readily standardised categories for reporting income sources. However, we have been able to classify the bulk of reported receipts into four income types: donations from groups and individuals; moneys raised through local appeals; moneys raised through regular fund-raising activities; and grants received from the parties’ national organisations. Figure 6 shows the distribution of total income (summed across all local parties making a return) across these headings for each party in both 2009 and 2010. For all three, the bulk of their constituency income in both years came from donations, appeals and fund-raising: only relatively small amounts came in the form of grants from the central to the local party. As most donations and virtually all fund-raising activity (including special appeals) were derived from local sources, this means that constituency parties were primarily dependent on funds raised in their immediate area.

For most sources of income, the amount raised increased substantially between 2009 and 2010, for obvious reasons. The latter was a General Election year, whereas the former was not (though it was a European Parliament election year and in some parts of the country there were also local government elections). In part this reflects parties’ greater needs for funds in General Election years; but in part, too, it almost certainly reflects the greater ease with which funds can be raised when a major election provides a focus for potential donors.

General Elections not only mobilise voters: they also mobilise party funders, even at the local level.

There are two important and substantial exceptions to this general pattern, however. Both involve Conservative constituency parties, which raised much more through fund-raising and from subventions from the national party in 2009 than in 2010. This was an outcome of a sophisticated target seats campaign established prior to the 2005 election by the party's then-treasurer, Lord Ashcroft, and run again in the build-up to the 2010 election. The strategy was to identify key marginals which the Conservatives had to win if they were to form the next government, then invest substantial sums in long-term preparations in these seats, so that when the election was called the local Conservative candidate would be fighting from a position of relative strength. Much attention (both academic and media) has been given to the so-called 'Ashcroft money', grants provided by the Conservatives nationally to local parties in marginal seats to bankroll these long-term preparations (Pattie and Johnston, 2009). To qualify for funding, local parties had to prepare and gain approval for a business plan showing how they would use the funds to improve the party's election prospects there. Analyses of the use of the Ashcroft money suggest it did pay electoral dividends in both 2005 and 2010 (Johnston and Pattie, 2007; Cutts *et al.*, 2012).

One striking feature of the 'Ashcroft money' scheme was the extent to which it was actively managed by the national party. The use of the grants was monitored centrally, as were the effects, and money was moved around: where it seemed a local association was either not making effective use of the funds, or where it appeared that the Conservatives prospects had so improved that the seat was almost certain to be taken, funds to other marginal seats. The 'business plans' submitted by local parties contained strategies for improved voter contact, for more active local fund-raising, and so on. But the emphasis was very much on preparations several years in advance of the election itself. During the 2005-2010 Parliament, these national party subventions to local associations therefore were not only focussed mainly on seats lost by the Conservatives by narrow margins in 2005, and which the party needed to win in 2010, but also peaked in 2009 (figure 7). By the time preparations began for the 2010 election itself, groundwork had been done and the perceived need for further central grants to local parties declined. Indeed, even taking into account the fact that the 2010 election occurred in the first half of the year (and hence there was less time in which to make grants than in previous years), the amount given by the national party to its local target parties was much lower than in the preceding ones. Perhaps as a consequence of its integration into the business plans which levered 'Ashcroft money' from the national party, Conservative local fund-raising followed a similar pattern too, peaking in 2009, not (as was the case for the other two parties) in 2010.

Neither Labour nor the Liberal Democrats had access to anything on the scale of the Ashcroft money, and they depended much more on donations and local fund-raising to finance their activities. Trade unions (especially the biggest, such as UNITE, the GMB and Unison) were major donors to Labour's constituency parties (figure 8). They provided around 43% of all declared donations throughout the period from 2001 to 2010. In contrast, individual donors were much more important for the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats (providing 57% of all donations to the former and 60% of those to the latter). And the Conservatives' grassroots parties were most likely to receive donations from businesses, mainly local ones.

But many donations to all three parties' constituency operations came from various 'unincorporated associations' which, in effect, moved funds from one part of a party's local

operations to another. For Labour and the Liberal Democrats, these were most often groups of local government councillors. Perhaps the most intriguing of these associations were, in effect, party ‘holding companies’; for instance, a group describing itself as ‘the Norfolk Tote’ gave a total of £103,607 to the South Norfolk Constituency Labour Party. But they also included party-affiliated clubs and trusts (such as the Weymouth Labour Club, which gave a total of £39,900 to the South Dorset constituency Labour party, and the Coggleshall Liberal Trust, which made donations worth £11,150 to the Liberal Democrats’ Braintree and Witham local party).

Donations from unincorporated associations to the Conservatives, however, emerged from somewhat different groups. Local councillor groups were far less important here. Many more were local clubs and societies associated with the party. Examples include the United and Cecil Club, a dining club which made donations to a number of local parties across the country, and the East Surrey Business Club, which focussed its donations on Conservative constituency associations in its local area. In most cases, however, the amounts going to individual constituency parties were small.

Conclusions

The picture which emerges of grassroots party organisation in Britain is not, therefore, a healthy one. Despite the growing consensus on the importance of constituency campaigning, most constituency parties operate very much on a shoestring. Only a few are well-resourced: many more struggle to provide even a limited level of local activity. And for the most part, the prospects for local parties to improve their situations seem small. They are largely dependent on their own local fund-raising activities, but few are awash with donors. By and large, those which are tend to be in the marginal seats: there is not much mileage in donating to a dead cert. Nor are national party organisations in a position to ride to the rescue. While central grants to local parties are made, these are restricted mainly to parties in the most marginal seats. In any case, the national parties, too, are cash-strapped and do not have significant largesse to bestow. It is extremely unlikely, therefore, that Labour or the Liberal Democrats will be in a position, any time soon, to match the Conservatives’ ‘Ashcroft money’ initiatives, and it is unlikely that the even the Conservatives could afford to extend any central grants scheme far beyond the party’s target seats.⁶

The implications for voter mobilization in British elections seem clear. For the foreseeable future, parties will continue to focus on mobilising only a minority of voters, located in the most marginal seats. Voters in other, safer, constituencies will remain relatively marginalised from the campaigns. Given the well-established relationship between campaign contact and turnout, this cannot be good news for those concerned with low levels of voter engagement in recent British General Elections.

The situation in the UK stands in marked contrast to that in the USA, where Senate and House campaigns are often awash with money, and standing for national office is increasingly a game for those with deep campaign pockets. Why is the British situation so different from that in the US? To some extent, the differences are structural. Compared to their American counterparts, British candidates and local parties operate in a much more restrictive environment. The legal spending limits on their constituency campaigns are very

⁶ There is no comparable programme for the 2015 general election and Lord Ashcroft is playing no part – and providing either money or donations-in-kind – to the national party organisation.

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3 tight indeed. Even relatively modest donations must be publicly declared, raising concerns for
4 the more publicity-shy. And, though they are far from simple lobby-fodder (Cowley, 2002,
5 2005), British MPs are far more constrained by their party, and far less able to act as
6 independent agents than their American counterparts. For all these reasons, the incentives for
7 making substantial gifts or donations to local parties in the UK are considerably smaller than
8 is the case in the US. Add to that the generally low esteem in which politicians are held by
9 the public, and the difficulties for local parties become clear.
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12 Whatever the normative merits of political parties with well-established and well-founded
13 grassroots organisations, therefore, the reality of the current British situation is that, in many
14 parts of the country, even the major parties are in a parlous condition. The days of mass
15 membership parties have almost certainly gone forever. In response, parties have adapted,
16 moving to catch-all and cartel styles of organisation (Kircheimer, 1966; Katz and Mair, 1995,
17 2009), and shifting from modernist to post-modern campaign strategies (Norris, 2000).
18 However, in doing so, their grassroots organisations have withered in many places. It seems
19 unlikely they will recover.
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Table 1. Campaign spending at the 2010 UK General Election

	Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrat
National campaign: total spending	£16,682,874	£8,009,483	£4,787,595
Constituency campaign: total spending	£9,839,058	£6,466,884	£5,020,845
Constituency campaign: mean spending	£15,618	£10,265	£7,970

For Peer Review

Table 2: The state of the party grassroots: single-constituency local accounting units, 2010

	Members	Income	Expenditure	Reserves	Fixed Assets
Conservative:					
Minimum	41	1,253	19,055	-23,724	0
Lower Quartile	247	36,320	40,727	16,980	0
Median	391	50,906	55,561	45,398	1,654
Upper Quartile	607	77,795	78,282	109,679	48,278
Maximum	37,363	240,655	243,898	1,502,361	1,400,185
Mean	578	61,808	64,610	83,818	46,111
Number	302	358	359	352	346
Labour:					
Minimum	190	13,423	4,886	-18,506	0
Lower Quartile	303	25,630	32,638	7,244	0
Median	411	36,601	38,513	22,017	0
Upper Quartile	672	53,874	54,562	107,431	33,064
Maximum	1,348	123,836	128,909	776,144	821,139
Mean	507	42,104	46,584	88,576	60,748
Number	35	80	80	72	72
Liberal Democrats:					
Minimum	80	6,461	14,656	-28,061	0
Lower Quartile	182	26,628	32,284	3,925	0
Median	241	40,740	41,346	10,893	0
Upper Quartile	295	53,743	55,307	28,647	2,085
Maximum	485	116,036	119,292	586,828	200,000
Mean	245	44,238	47,268	782,915	16,328
Number	67	80	80	78	76

Figure 1. The distribution of constituency campaign spending in 2010

For Peer Review

Figure 2: Constituency campaign spending 2010 and marginality

a) Conservative spending

b) Labour spending

For Peer Review

For Peer Review

c) Liberal Democrat spending

For Peer Review

Figure 3: Campaign spending in 2010: long and short campaigns

For Peer Review

Figure 4 Number of constituency parties making a financial return to the Electoral Commission by year.

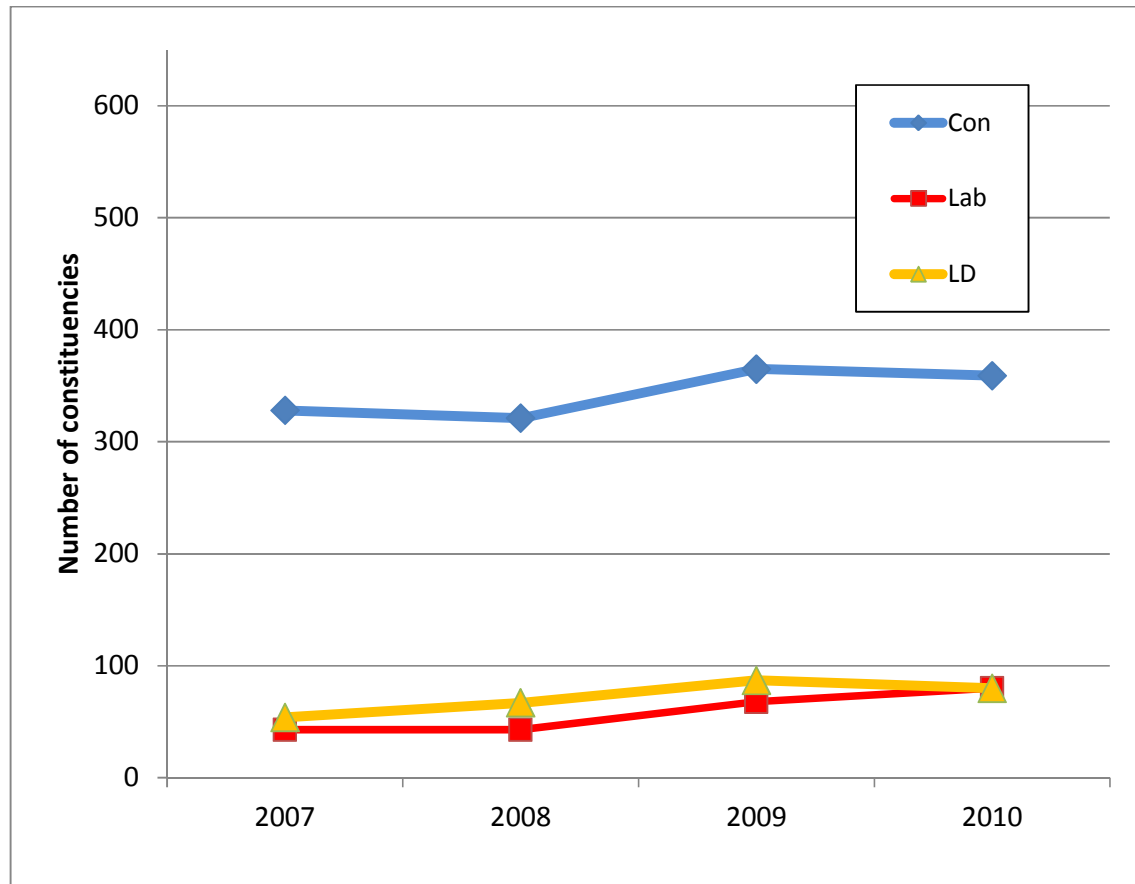


Figure 5: Number of constituency parties making financial returns to the Electoral Commission in 2010 by marginality of constituency in 2005

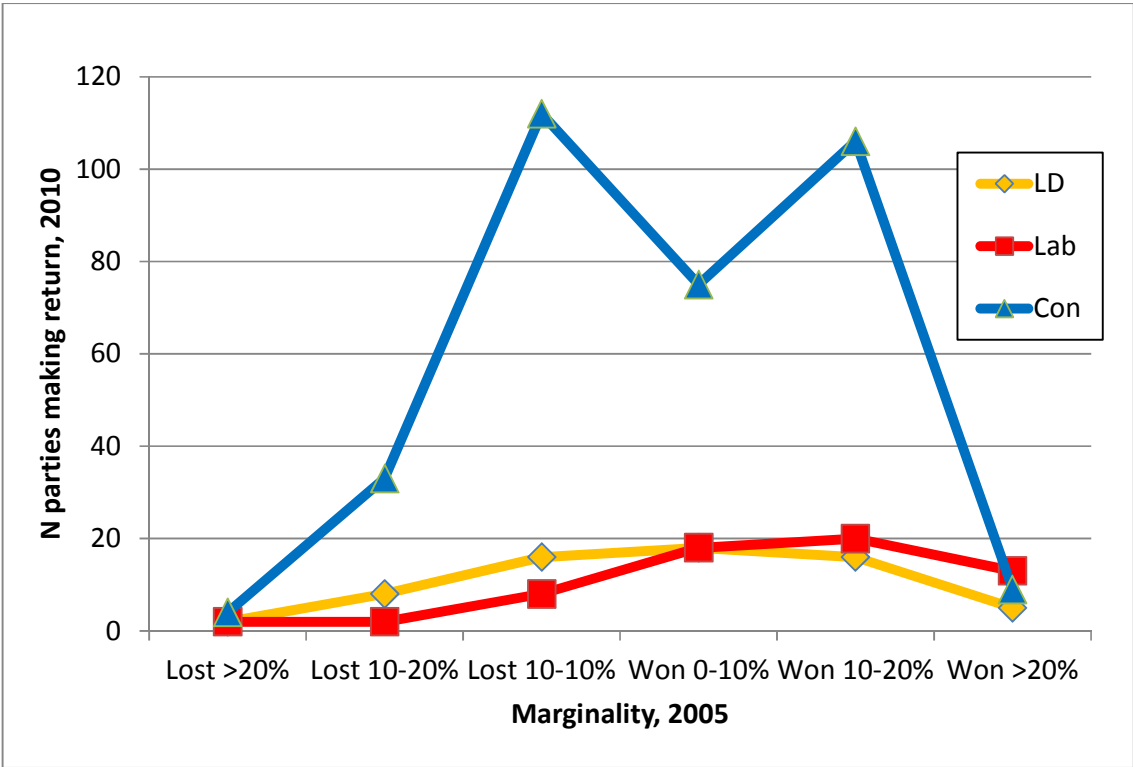


Figure 6: Main sources of income for constituency parties, 2009 and 2010

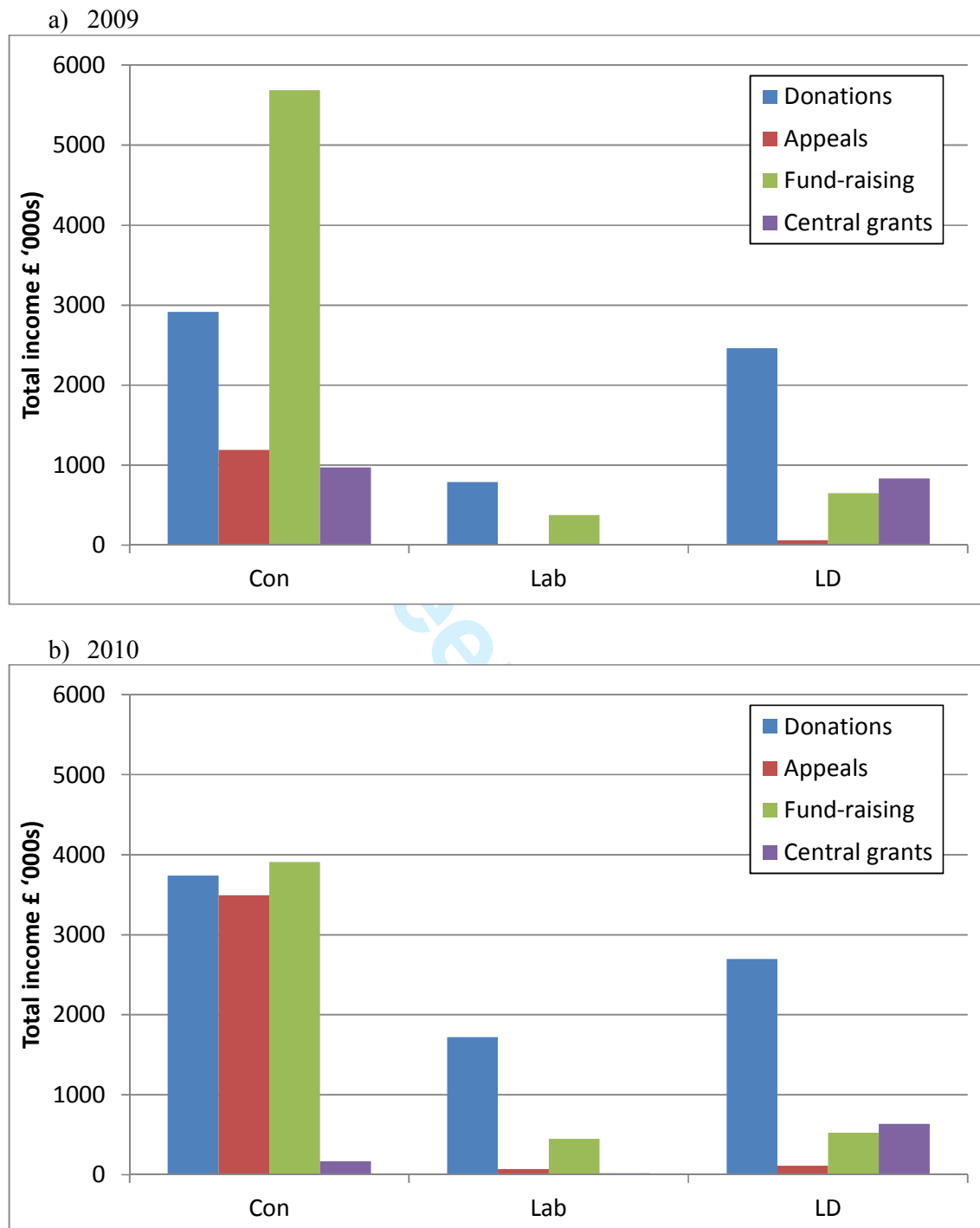


Figure 7: Grants from the Conservative national party: distributing the ‘Ashcroft money’

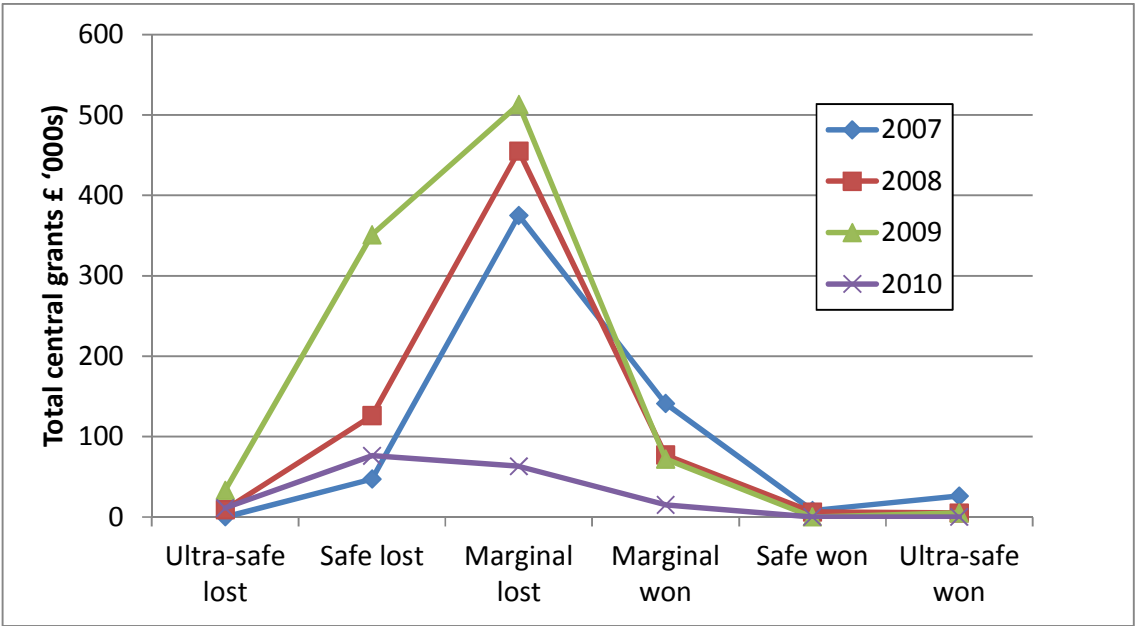
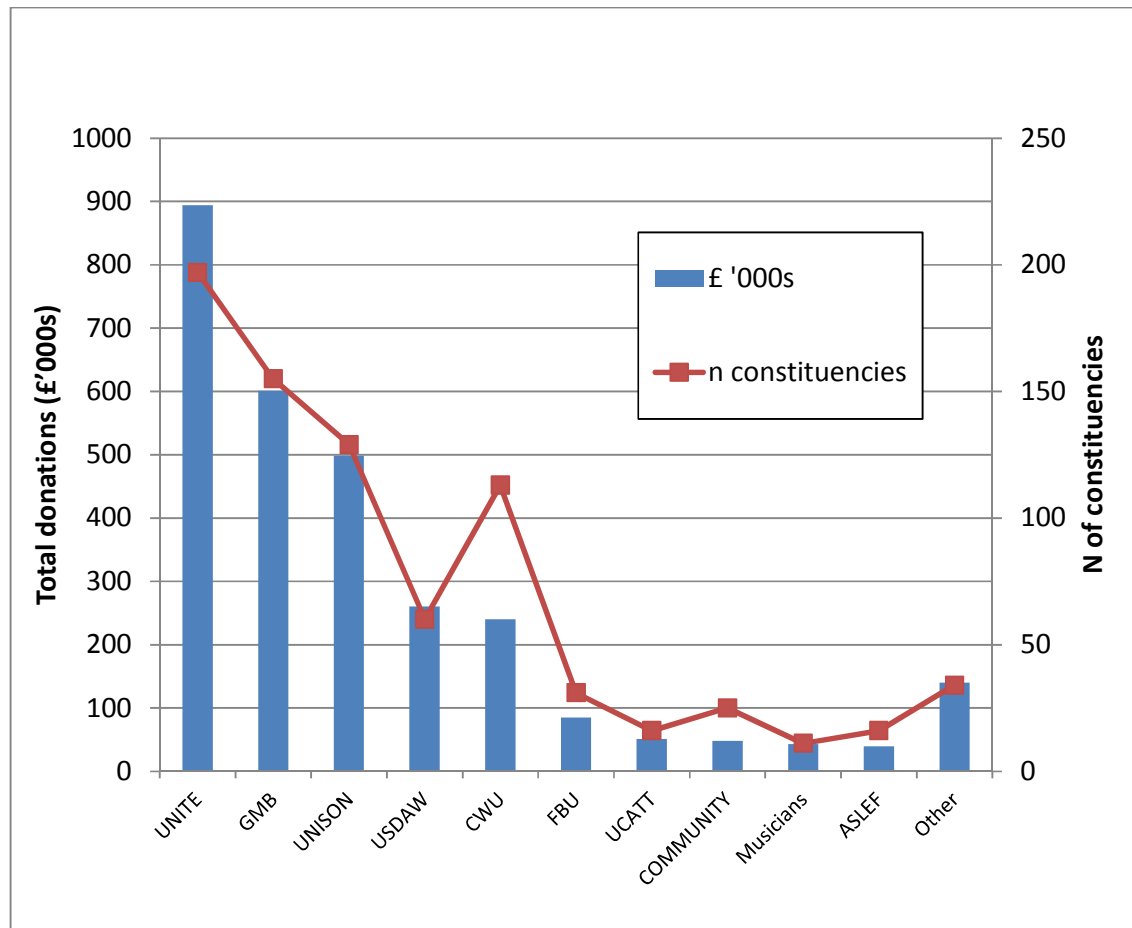


Figure 8: Trade union donations to Labour constituency parties, 2007-2010



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